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Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Angela Spirito by Cheryl Babiec

Angela Spirito

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COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE Angela Spirito (3)

INTERVIEWER Cheryl Babiec

DATE OF INTERVIEW 3/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

Family background

Traditions

Employment

Education

Community

Prejudice encountered

Loss of traditions

Oral History/Interview

with

Angela Spirito

MARCH '79

Cranston Residence

By Cheryl Babiec

INTERVIEWEE: My name is Angela Spirito - third generation.

INTERVIEWER: Right now, maybe you can give me a little bit of background information in regards to your early family life.

INTERVIEWEE: My early family life. I was brought up by my grandmother and grandfather and they were very old fashion Italian.

INTERVIEWER: Why would you say they were old fashion Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: Well they never really went anywhere and they were, I would say, I was young, about four or five, on a farm, had a garden, there were chickens. And more or less, stayed, you know, within the family. My grandfather's family lived around there and we'd visit them. Holidays, everyone, he was the oldest in the family, his brothers and their children - they'd all come and visit them on holidays. Very old fashion. They did their own. My grandmother did all - preserved and made her own bread. Everything they ate came from their garden.

INTERVIEWER: Now, they were born in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes! They were born in Italy.

INTERVIEWER: Do they speak Italian too?

INTERVIEWEE: Only Italian. I spoke Italian. Still do.

But I was brought up with Italian. They never spoke English. Of course we all went to school.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of their hopes for you? Now you didn't live with your parents, right?

INTERVIEWEE: My father. My mother and father were divorced. My mother went to live with her family. And she thought it would be best if we stayed, because my grandparents owned their own home and there was room for us there instead of with her. Of course she came to visit us every week. And my grandmother and grandfather had a lot of respect for my mother and they liked her very much.

INTERVIEWER: Seeing that they were very old fashion^{ed}, how did they look upon - now I imagine religion was very important....

INTERVIEWEE: They were very religious - yes.

INTERVIEWER: How did they look upon your parent's divorce?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh I

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel it effected or had any drastic effects?

INTERVIEWEE: No. Because it was my father's fault. He was very young. I think he wasn't quite seventeen when he married and he didn't want the responsibility of the marriage. And he really didn't care to work and support a wife and two children. And, you know, they accepted it.

INTERVIEWER: Now your parents spoke Italian to you?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, my mother and father are English. They know how to speak Italian but we always spoke English.

INTERVIEWER: So, who would you say had the most impact in regards to carrying on Italian traditions? Would it be mostly your grandparents who influenced you?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. And my mother also carried on the traditions I thought.

INTERVIEWER: What would you consider a typical Italian tradition? Or some of the things that you can relate to as being Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: The family being together a lot. She had a large family and we were very close.

INTERVIEWER: What do you consider a large family?

INTERVIEWEE: Like eight - like seven sisters and two brothers.

INTERVIEWER: You came from a large family, I mean they had.

INTERVIEWEE: My father was the only son. It was my mother who had a large family.

INTERVIEWER: Now, do you feel that you... from your parents - how did they influence you in regards to maintaining the Italian culture? Or your grandparents even? Like what things did you feel that you wanted to carry on say to your offspring in regards to Italian culture? Was there anything they had stressed as being important? Say language, customs....

INTERVIEWEE: Language, I thought, was nice to know. Even when I went to school, I took up Italian at school - it was different from how we spoke it at home.

INTERVIEWER: Now was the school you went to a regular public school?

INTERVIEWEE: Public high school.

INTERVIEWER: Did you do anything on holidays?

INTERVIEWEE: We observed holidays of course. Saint Joseph's feast day and regular holidays of the month. Palm Sunday, we always brought palm to our relatives when we were little. In fact, I think, just a few years ago, I had stopped doing it. I'd even go with my husband for a visit to a few of my aunts.

INTERVIEWER: What I'm trying to get after too, is outside of name, having an Italian name, something else you would draw upon to keep that ethnic aspect going. You said about language as something of importance. Is that something you had hoped

you would speak in your home, with your children? Carry on a little bit of what your parents gave to you?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I thought.... I do speak it even now from time to time. I thought it was nice.

INTERVIEWER: With your grandparents.... church was really important.

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. They were very religious. More so than my mother and father. They were religious, but not like my grandmother and grandfather.

INTERVIEWER: Their values for you in regards to they wanted to see you when you got older - married - to a nice Italian boy or

INTERVIEWEE: I don't think my grandmother and grandfather.... I can't say honestly, they wanted us to marry an Italian. They didn't make too much of it.

INTERVIEWER: Did they want to see you pursue something further in education - like college?

INTERVIEWEE; Oh yes. They believed if you could go to school, to go ahead.

INTERVIEWER: Did they stress that?

INTERVIEWEE: No, they just wished it. They kept telling us to be good girls all the time.

INTERVIEWER: Now to the present day, your role within your family, how does it compare or doesn't it compare to that of your grandmother's. Seeing that you had lived with your grandmother, and grandfather, I'll compare you with them. Now was your grandmother the type - very independent or was she....

INTERVIEWEE: No, extremely old fashion. My grandfather, he ruled the house, and she stayed in the house. They did very little on their own. They more or less worked together all the time. Visiting or working, they were together. Shopping, going to Olneyville - quite a place, did a lot of shopping there.

INTERVIEWER: Where did they live?

INTERVIEWEE: In Johnston.

INTERVIEWER: Do you compare with her?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I don't think so. Maybe... I like to keep house and I have worked part time.

INTERVIEWER: Now your grandmother did not work outside their home, did she?

INTERVIEWEE: No, took care of the garden.

INTERVIEWER: Was that something your grandfather had not wanted her to do?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I mentioned before, they had a farm I was told, I don't remember. I just remember a very large garden. They planted everything and preserved.

INTERVIEWER: Did she make a lot of Italian dishes?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes. Everything was Italian at my grandmother's. But being in America for so many years - she hardly - knew very few English words. She spoke very little English. For being here so long, it's kind of unusual. But no, she was in the house quite a lot.

INTERVIEWER: Was she the spokeswoman of the house or was your grandfather? Or was he the passive type that would be in the background and your grandmother being the main figurehead within the house?

INTERVIEWEE: It seems that they were equal.

INTERVIEWER: Her role was within the house?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, definitely.

INTERVIEWER: So you can't really say you compare to that?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh no.

INTERVIEWER: You, I imagine, make Italian dishes every so often.

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes, I do a lot of Italian cooking - my husband likes Italian food. But I also make other dishes.

INTERVIEWER: You speak Italian and English. Do you speak Italian now within you house?

INTERVIEWEE: No, not really that much.

INTERVIEWER: Is it because....

INTERVIEWEE: I really have no reason to speak Italian all the time. My grandmother and grandfather passed on. My father also - he spoke English. Of course he knew Italian very well, but he didn't speak Italian to my mother.

INTERVIEWER: Even your husband doesn't....?

INTERVIEWEE: No. My father-in-law was born in Italy, but he's been in America many, many years and he speaks English. Speaks both, but mainly English.

INTERVIEWER: So it's mostly of Italian descent on both sides of your family?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have the hopes that it would continue in lineage or you don't mind if your offspring marry outside of the Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh no.

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to see them maintain some of the Italian identity?

INTERVIEWEE: It's up to Angela.

INTERVIEWER: Seeing that there was a breakdown within the family lineage in regards to Italian culture in comparison to your grandparents. Where and why do you think it may have broken down?

INTERVIEWEE: I don't know if it would be education. The younger generation going to school. Take my grandmother and grandfather, well they had no schooling. My father, well say me - naturally everyone went to school - at least to high school.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go out and work later on? Outside the home?

INTERVIEWEE: After school you mean?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes. I worked before I got out of school. I worked part time in the city. I was fourteen and I had worked two days a week, in a dress shop - a stock girl. My sister

worked for a dentist (two years older) a couple of days a week. Oh yes, we drove. We were young and we learned how to drive.

INTERVIEWER: So it was another thing that took you away from the home. So you think education is one of the primary factors?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Can you think of anything else - like the breakdown in language which was prevalent in your grandparent's home. Did your mother speak it to you?

INTERVIEWEE: Mother always spoke English.

INTERVIEWER: Where your grandparents lived, was it a predominantly Italian neighborhood?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Were mostly immigrants from Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: So that played a part too? Now was it the same when you moved away with your mother?

INTERVIEWEE: Not an Italian neighborhood.

INTERVIEWER: Where?

INTERVIEWEE: In Providence on Reservoir Avenue. No, it wasn't in comparison. We, my sister and I, went to Reservoir Avenue School, we were the only Italians in the school. I never heard the word WASP until I went to that school. I went home and asked my mother what a Wasp was. She just said to ignore it. It was a slang expression for Italians.

INTERVIEWER: How would you say the neighborhoods compared?

INTERVIEWEE: I can't - it was more or less in the country. But it was nice, well kept. Everyone owned their own homes out in the country. Of course we came into Providence - it was different. Right off a main street - Reservoir Avenue.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think your grandparents settled out in the country as a result of similarity to where they had lived in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. That's the only life they knew - farming.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember where they had lived in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Naples. But out in the country. My husband would know.

INTERVIEWER: So they had settled into something similar.

INTERVIEWEE: I seem to think my grandfather had been something to do - some sort of policeman in Italy.

INTERVIEWER: Did they know many people in the neighborhood? People they knew in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes. He had brothers. My grandfather had two sisters and three brothers and they all lived around one another. In fact the sister lived right across the street.

INTERVIEWER: So it was a family community. Was there a church nearby?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, in the next town. Saint Rocco's Church which still exists. Of course they made a new one.

INTERVIEWER: That's where everybody???

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes. We had to walk.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have any special festivities?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes. Celebrated several, two - three, feasts during the summer time. In fact, my grandfather was president of one of the societies and that was a big day, weekend. There were band concerts and you name it.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have clubs you could belong to?

INTERVIEWEE: They did have a club. The men would play cards. That was a store really and behind the store there was an enormous hall and showers would be held there. I remember a few when I was young though.

INTERVIEWER: Nothing really for girls though.

INTERVIEWEE: Oh no. Even in school I don't think we had anything.

INTERVIEWER: You had mentioned after your move to Providence...

INTERVIEWEE: Another world... another world....

INTERVIEWER: When you first heard the word WASP, it didn't really effect you. Your mother said to forget

about it.

INTERVIEWEE: Just ignore it. We learned other things. I'll tell you, my mother - my step-father built the house that we lived in and the neighbors put up a petition when they heard Italians were moving into the neighborhood. They didn't want them there.

INTERVIEWER: What type of neighborhood was it? Concentrated ethnic groups?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. And they turned out to be wonderful people after we got to know them.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know what type?

INTERVIEWEE: No. Well right across the street, there was a nice Swedish couple. He was an old captain. It was really mixed.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that all of a sudden when an Italian is moving into the neighborhood that they how did you find out about the petition?

INTERVIEWEE: I remember my mother telling us about it. We weren't living with her at the time - it was after. Someone on the street, I think, worked in city hall in Providence, and he's the one that started it. He turned out to be very nice. All the neighbors were very nice. They liked us.

INTERVIEWER: But it didn't leave a negative stigma with you or your family?

INTERVIEWEE: It probably did. But they didn't hold it against the neighbors at all. I got married from that house.

INTERVIEWER: Even in school it didn't bother you when they mentioned that word to you?

INTERVIEWEE: We weren't exactly that happy. Coming from our old school to this one. It was a big change.

INTERVIEWER: So you did change schools. What kind of school did you go to prior to the one in Providence?

INTERVIEWEE: It was a two room, - three grades in each one.

INTERVIEWER: Was it all Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: No, there a few who weren't Italian. Not many.

INTERVIEWER: You were taught in English?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh yes. We all spoke English. We spoke Italian (the kids)- I went to school with. Many of my cousins - we were quite a group. The teachers were not Italian.

INTERVIEWER: How did you ever come to settling in Cranston?

INTERVIEWEE: I've been here for seventeen years, thirteen years in Providence. My mother's in Edgewood. My father-in-law 's in Edgewood. I guess that's what brought us here.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find your neighborhood predominantly Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: Here? No.

INTERVIEWER: Do you still maintain ties with Saint Rocco's?

INTERVIEWEE: No. Saint Matthew's. I got married there.

INTERVIEWER: What type of church is it?

INTERVIEWEE: Portugese, Irish....mixed.

INTERVIEWER: Would you want your children to maintain the cultural customs (observe holidays)?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I would. It's nice.

INTERVIEWER: You'd rather they'd make their own decision?

INTERVIEWEE: It seems as though they'd probably would anyways now a days. It's nice. I told my daughter many times I'd like to live my childhood over again even if I didn't have my mother and father together.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you say that?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh I enjoyed my grandmother and grandfather. They were nice people. A lot of love, togetherness, went places together and we visited. Well there's a difference now- nobody visits anymore really. I'll blame television for that. People like to stay home and watch their T.V.. We would visit my father's relatives and also my mother's family, her sisters, my mother's mother, my father. So many cars, clubs to belong, some women play tennis, golf.

INTERVIEWER: So you really miss that. Do you try to make up

for it within your own family?

INTERVIEWEE: I try. But sometimes it doesn't work out that way. People are busy doing their own thing.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel any regret that this is getting lost?

INTERVIEWEE: Sometimes I do.

INTERVIEWER: It's just one of those things with the passing of time - the changing.

INTERVIEWEE: I think so - the modern times.